DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 077 277 FL 003 969

AUTHOR	Young, George M., Jr.
TITLE	On Apes, Poetry, and Language Teaching.
PUB DATE	24 Nov 72
NOTE	12p.; Paper delivered at the 6th Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Atlanta, Ga., November 24, 1972 and included in the 1972 Proceedings of the SCOLT/ACTFL Joint Meeting
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Applied Linguistics; College Language Programs; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; Learning Theories; *Modern Languages; *Poetry; *Russian; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A psychological experiment in which an ape manipulates colored linguistic symbols as a means of ostensibly learning a language suggests to the author that students, analogously, may be able to learn a foreign language by studying the use of linguistic elements in poems. Selected examples of Russian poetry illustrate the potential use of poetry in language instruction. (RL)

ED 077277

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

On Apes, Poetry, and Language Teaching

A Paper Delivered at the 1972 ACTFL Convention

FL003 969

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

Perhaps many in the audience will remember the cover story of the October 1972 issue of Scientific American. The cover itself tells much of the story. We see, from the rear, a hirsute primate contemplating the blank space between two sets of colored symbols attached to a magnetic board. Even from our rear view it can be observed that the primate's brow is not that of a Shakespeare or an Einstein, its neck not that of a Modigliani sophisticate. Indeed, the total distance between the crown of the primate's head and the upper reaches of its shoulders does not greatly exceed the diameter of the pink, extended ears. Yet in its right fist the primate firmly clutches an esoteric yellow symbol, which it is about to place, or not place, in the blank area between the two sets of other esoteric symbols. The expression on the primate's face -- whether of deep concentration, hopeless bewilderment, determined earnesty, or sudden inspiration -- is not shown. Under the picture we read the caption: "Teaching Language To An Ape."

In the article itself we learn something amazing: that the esoteric symbols on the left stand for "chocolate', "is", and

"brown": those on the right for "brown", "color of", and "chocolate". The esoteric symbol around which the primate has wrapped its thumb stands for "same". The picture, then, depicts an historic event: an ape in Santa Barbara is about to plunge headlong into language.

As I read this article, it occurred to me that using colored esoteric symbols to teach language to apes is like using poetry to teach Russian to Dartmouth students -- in at least four ways. First, one begins with the assumption that success will not be total. Second, it is perhaps a task which not every language teacher would wish to undertake. Third, results, if sometimes striking, are not always repeatable. And fourth, no matter how well the pupil learns his esoteric symbols, no matter how many Apples or Bananas he earns by his efforts, his ability to swing from limb to limb through the jungle is not vastly improved.

One could, perhaps, develop these similarities further and even add others to the list, but I shall not. Let us, for the moment, move the challenging problem of teaching apes into the background, and bring to the foreground the equally challenging problem of teaching our students the Russian language through Russian poetry.

First, we must ask what language skills, what knowledge of the language, <u>can not</u> best be transmitted through the teaching of poetry, and then we can consider what, perhaps, <u>can</u> best be taught through Russian verse.

The study of poetry at any level is probably not the surest

way for a student to attain a command of everyday spoken Russian. Ja pomnju čudnoe mgnoven'e, and I vižu bereg očarovannyj,/ I očarovannuju dal', while magnificent, are not lines that a speaker would have daily occasion to use. As one who myself learned the poetry before the vernacular, I can testify that one can know by heart the long passage in which Lermontov's Demon announces his identity to Tamara, and still be at a loss for words when suddenly requested by a little old Russian lady at a desk to identify oneself. A thorough knowledge of the language peaks does not necessarily prepare one for downtown Moscow.

Neither is the reading of poetry probably the most effective or systematic way to expand one's reading vocabulary. It is true that the student of poetry spends as much time looking up words as he does reading poems, but all too often a large percentage of the words he looks up are ones he may not encounter again for some years. Not all word frequency lists agree at all points, but "kol'", as in Lomonosov's "kol' velik tvorec?", and "dlan'", as in Deržavin's "I v dlani s vizgom udarjaj" have probably not been included in anyone's top one thousand for a number of years. And the problem is not only in eighteenth century poetry. The student who, after Puškin, Lermontov, and Fet, is just beginning to congratulate himself on being able to recognize more words than he has to look up, discovers, with the Futurists, that he might as well go back to the Slovo o polku Igoreve for all he can understand. And even in the relatively accessible works of the nineteenth century,

the study of poetry is not without hazards. A student may at language table find himself saying zlatoj instead of zolotoj, he may remember persty and oči after he has forgotten palcy and glaza. For vocabulary building the Penguin Anthology is not the best substitute for a good graded reader.

If one of the goals of intermediate and advanced languages instruction is to break the student's decoding habit and to train him to read rapidly for comprehension, then poetry is not the best material through which this goal might be accomplished. In reading a story or a novel, a student should perhaps stop after a page or a chapter to ask what he has understood; but in poetry the significant units are smaller. One wants the student of poetry to pause after each stanza, sometimes after each line, and sometimes even after each image or word. One wants him to spend an hour on an eight-line poem, examining the patterns of sound and imagery, the repetition of important words, even the order in which images, ideas, and sounds unfold. Translation into English, anathema to progressive language teachers, is often sound pedagogy in the teaching of poetry. To turn a plodder into a page-a-minute man, then, one must adopt texts other than Baratynskij, Tjutčev, Cvetaeva, and Mandel'štam.

One might, at first thought, argue that if the study of poetry is not the best way to teach conversational Russian, build the student's vocabulary, or increase his reading speed, then at least

it ought to help the student remember where the stress falls. But consider Blok's: I nad kladbíščem -- mernyj zvon. That Blok is using an archaic variant for special effect is little comfort to the student who, having memorized the line, may someday lose a crucial half-point for not remembering kládbiše. Another way in which poetry may hinder a student's progress toward the mastery of Russian stress is that the reading of metrical verse, especially iambic verse, reinforces one's errant tendency to transfer English patterns of secondary stress into Russian. A conversation teacher can tell a student again and again that most Russian words carry only one stress, yet when reading the poem to himself the student will almost invariably say: prodólgovátyj i prozračnyj/ Kak pérsty dévy mólodój. When he memorizes lines containing new words, those words may remain engraved in his mind forever -- with secondary stress.

All this, however, is not to say that the study of poetry has no place in an undergraduate language sequence. I believe that while the most important reasons for studying poetry have little to do with the acquisition of specific language skills, that nevertheless, even as an aid to language teaching, poetry has a special and important place in the curriculum. The reading of poetry in class need not be justified solely as a device for language teaching, but it can be justified even on those narrow grounds. If the study of poetry is not the best way for a student to gain a practical command of Russian as it is spoken and written every day,

it may be the best way for him to learn of the expressive potential of the Russian language. One does not every day use such expressions as genij čistoj krasoty, but it does not harm the student to be aware that, surrounded by billions of non-occurrances, such phrases can occur.

Ideally the student should probably turn to poetry after he has learned to speak and read with considerable fluency. After he has learned half a dozen ways that a given thought may be expressed, he is in a better position to understand why Puškin has made the perfect choice. Perhaps only after Russian speech patterns have become familiar to him can the student appreciate that poetry is language made new by being made slightly, or more than slightly, strange.

But in fact, the student usually received his introduction to poetry well before he is fluent in the language. Even under these less than ideal conditions, however, the study of poetry can still do the student more good than harm.

While in his other language classes, or in his other assignments, the student is urged to speed up, to learn to use patterns without having to pause to think about them, is trained in automatic response and schooled in the reproduction or adaptation of set verbal structures, the study of poetry offers an opportunity to slow down, to reflect on the patterns he has been learning to use, to observe the creative anthithesis of the automatic response, and to investigate the exceptions to the common rules with which he has

been filling his head. As there is, the Bible assures us, a time for reaping as well as for sowing, so also might there well be a time for meditating on the use of kladbisce as well as a time for learning automatically to say kladbisce. The study of poetry, then, while not a way to fluency, offers the student a much needed opportunity to stop and examine closely that which, to gain fluency, he must rush past.

Poetry teaches not so much how language is daily used as how once in a blue moon language is possible to be used. If a student can not speak a coherent sentence about the city in which he lives, then to learn through poetry that a gorod can sometimes be a grad may, for the moment, introduce more confusion than coherence to his utterances. If he has, at best, a fingernail grasp on the difference between short and long adjectives, then to read a bylina may cost him his grasp altogether. But it is perhaps not too optimistic to believe that only in the short run does being confronted with more possibilities than one can immediately put to use prove more harmful than beneficial.

One more or less practical thing the study of poetry can do is to expose the student to the history of the Russian language. One can lecture on the disappearance and reappearance of words, but the student of poetry is able to discover that just as he begins to recognize some words, like vnemlet, poets stop using them. He may be delighted to discover later, in Blok, that the word suddenly reappears with special force as a deliberate poetic archaism. In

poetry, also, perhaps more than in any other sample of the language, one can demonstrate the significance of the variance between the Church Slavic and Old Russian forms of the same word. In comparing the Slavonic diction of Blok's Prekrasnaja Dama poems with the saltier diction of his poems about street women, the student can become aware that the difference between Church Slavic and Russian-rooted words is of more than historical importance.

The study of poetry affords also an unparalleled opportunity to examine the most expressive use of Russian grammar and syntax. The effective use of case can perhaps be illustrated nowhere better than in Puškin's lines: "No čeloveka čelovek/ Poslal k ančaru vlastnym vzgljadom". It is instructive to let the student discover how many English words are required to say all that Puškin says in eight in Russian. And in syntax, one can, by contrasting Puškin and Baratynskij, demonstrate just how significant word order can be: that it can make a great difference whether the subject stands at the beginning of the sentence, or, as in Baratynskij, after strings of participles, relative clauses, and prepositional phrases, just before the sentence is lost forever, there appears, to return it to meaning and safety, the all-redeeming subject. Another feature of Russian that finds perfect expression in poetry is the principle of the missing verb. Though Fet perhaps did not view as his prime task the composition of poems to illustrate a phenomenon of grammar, he could not have provided better examples of verbless action had language teachers commissioned him to do so. In many of his poems,

but especially in the one that begins "Šopot, robkoe dyxan'e" one gets the impression that everything has happened until one tries to count the verbs. If the study of poetry can not lead the student to fluency in Russian, then, it can at least expose him to some examples of what is most Russian about the Russian language.

One of the first exercises I give my poetry class is the task of translating a "mystery poem" into English. After they have labored for hours and have reached the conclusion that the task is impossible, I reveal the secret. The "mystery poem" is Pasternak's translation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 66. The analysis that follows this revelation gets at the differences between the best use of English and the best use of Russian. Another fruitful exercise of this kind is to assign the student to study the three versions of Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Gray's original, Žukovskij's celebrated iambic translation of 1802, and his more accurate dactylic version of 1839. This exercise permits the student not only to examine the differences between Russian and English, but also to examine the differences between two kinds of Russian: the lofty, idyllic, "poetical" diction of the 1802 version, and the deliberately more earthy, "realistic" diction of the 1839 version. Since one of the major factors in the difference between the Žukovskij of 1802 and the Žukovskij of 1839 was Puškin, this exercise offers the student a concrete opportunity to understand what his professors mean when they speak of Puškin's impact on literary Russian.

I have tried, then, to suggest a few ways in which the study of poetry might serve the study of language. I would not argue that the reading and reciting of poetry should replace the reading and reciting of works on how one can get from anywhere to Red Square. But as a complement, rather than a substitute, to other kinds of language instruction, the study of poetry has much to offer the student of Russian. It may also introduce him to a literature that he will find worth his time to learn to read. Not for all, but for some, to be able to read a Puškin or Mandel'štam without looking up all the words may become a goal worth the hard work required to reach it.

At the beginning of this report, I suggested some ways in which I thought the teaching of Russian to students through poetry might be similar to teaching languages to apes by esoteric symbols. More important than the similarities between the two endeavors, however, are the ways in which they differ. I would like to conclude this report, then by enumerating four ways in which, it has occurred to me, the teaching of language to apes may be unlike the teaching of Russian to Dartmouth students. First, though if both were wearing Big Green jackets one might not in every case be able to pick from a distance which was the student, one could tell them apart by whether or not the esoteric symbol for "same" was placed, or not placed, between "chocolate is brown" and "brown color of chocolate." The student of poetry would know the two are different, the first being a quotation from Puškin, the second from Fet. Second, the

longer the ape contemplates his symbols, the less likely he is to recall his jungle origins. Not necessarily so with the student of Russian poetry. Third, in teaching language to apes one may not have to stay up so late into the night to be certain of remaining at least one step ahead. And fourth, having learned to recognize certain symbols, the ape would probably never think of trying to create new ones. That one can not be so certain of the student of poetry may be one of the best reasons for teaching it to him.

George M. Young, Jr.
Dartmouth College